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REACHING OUT

AUBURN SEMINARY LAUNCHES THE CENTER
FOR THE STUDY OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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The research themes and strategies of Auburn's new study center place it in Auburn's long tradition of extending theological resources to the church and the world beyond it.

Through the education and training of their clergy, the nation's largest religious communions—Protestant, Catholic and Jewish—exert a pervasive influence on the entire society. Yet the study of theological education has not found recognition in the appropriate academic and social arenas. Nor has this research made the full and important impact on theological education that it could.

After considering results of a study of these problems, the Board of Directors of Auburn Theological Seminary declared the need for a research institute focusing specifically and comprehensively on theological education. In August 1991, it chartered the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, thus launching the first institutional effort devoted to

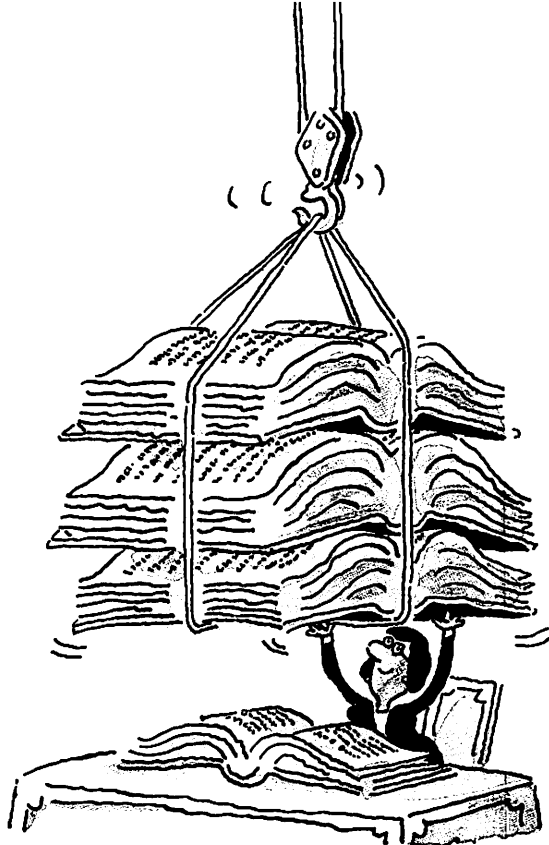
the study of how theological education happens, how it affects religious communities and the wider culture, and how it can be improved.

In its initial phase, the Auburn Center will direct sustained attention to three major themes: 1) practices of teaching and learning; 2) institutional resources; and 3) the role of theological institutions in religious and public life. The Center will examine each theme by organizing around it a variety of research projects, using different but complementary research methods. It will explore the shape that these themes assume not only for seminaries and rabbinical schools but also for the other

educational and church institutions that teach theology. It will make special efforts to share what are likely to be the rich and complex results of these clusters of research with the several different audiences that have an interest in theological education. And it will enhance its own efforts and enrich others by building cooperative relationships with other researchers and centers that contribute to theological-education research. This article explains in greater detail the Center's focusing themes and how it will do its work.

The past decade has seen an unprecedented amount of research and reflection on theological education, efforts with which Auburn's staff and board leaders were well acquainted. In 1990, Auburn completed an evaluation of ten years of research that had been funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., the largest sponsor of such studies. Led by Auburn's president, Barbara Wheeler, and David Kelsey, professor of theology at the Yale Divinity School and an Auburn consultant, a team of evaluators assessed the quality and impact of 50 research projects supported by nearly \$5 million in grants and producing more than 75 published products.¹ They found the amount and quality of work to be impressive and learned that several studies had already exerted significant influence.

Auburn's leaders concluded that the accumulation and impact of that research called for an overarching structure devoted to its perpetuation



and strengthening. The time was right for a coordinated effort to support work already underway, keep researchers in fruitful contact with each other, identify issues and topics not yet addressed, and recruit new researchers. Such a center could catalyze this new research field by focusing on major questions for sustained periods of time and using a range of research approaches to provide educational leaders with the different kinds of information they need to make decisions.

None of the existing structures that support higher-education research, either inside or outside the academy, is positioned to focus on theological education. As David Kelsey has pointed out, academic guild structures have not recognized this research as a distinct field of scholarly study.² The academy has no rewards, such as promotion or tenure, for scholars who do such

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research; no department of theological education studies exists to foster and institutionalize it. Existing centers for higher-education research largely ignore theological education. A few religious research centers as well as some higher-education service organizations are involved to some extent with theological-education research but do not specialize in it.³ Viewing theological education as its special mandate, the Auburn venture seeks to insure the kind of ongoing attention to this young research area that no other institution is prepared to provide.

A specialized center is needed not only to do research but also to disseminate research results. The seminaries and other religious institutions that can benefit from this work lack the staff to monitor, gather, and interpret research as it becomes available. Through publications, conferences and other mechanisms, a center can fill the gap between the developing body of findings and its various appropriate audiences.

The most compelling reason to establish a center, however, is that it can take on the largest, most persistent issues facing theological education. Because a center can stick with the large issues over a period of years, it can eventually produce a body of research on a particular theme or issue that illuminates different perspectives, untangles the knottiest problems and explores possible solutions and new directions. Although researchers and

agencies that do occasional research on theological education often produce valuable results, only a center dedicated to theological-education research can guarantee the kind of sustained attention to tough questions that seminary leaders will require in years to come.

Three Themes

After wide-ranging discussions about the state of the church, the society, higher education and theological education, the Center's panel of advisers identified for the initial research period the three broad themes listed above. These themes build on previous research and encompass the issues and challenges that seminary and other religious leaders regularly report are of greatest and most far-reaching concern to them and their constituencies.

ONE: PRACTICES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Auburn will conduct studies that produce richly-textured descriptions of education as it takes place in actual schools. Such studies will incorporate the formal and informal patterns of activity in which students, teachers and other community members participate. They will probe participants' backgrounds, attitudes and motives, and will identify the ideas, symbols and language in play among the actors. They will look at ways in which churches, graduate schools, community institutions and other external organizations may buttress or undercut the goals of theological educators.

These descriptions can then orient and enrich broader studies that survey

large groups of schools and numbers of people. The descriptive studies can also help to anchor philosophical and theological reflection about what should be the goals, concepts, language, location, standards, requirements and partnerships of different kinds of theological schools and programs. All these different studies taken together are more likely than separate studies to yield a deep and complete understanding of how education happens.

TWO: INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES

A second group of studies will focus on the stability of theological institutions: whether they have adequate human and financial assets, sound practices of governance and management, and durable legal and financial relationships with denominations and organizations of other kinds. Stability is prerequisite to educational reform and improvement. Schools cannot devote sustained attention to questions of mission and educational quality if they are preoccupied with questions of survival. Therefore, research that helps schools to understand and solve their operational problems is essential.

Auburn also intends, however, to subject institutional topics to varieties of research they rarely receive—historical study and theological and ethical scrutiny. This approach will highlight what many recent data-based studies of institutional issues have often obscured: the fact that institutional problems, even severe crises, can be opportunities for, rather than obstacles to, fundamental decision-making about educational mission and purpose. The Center will provide a battery of

documents and public discussions designed to help institutions understand how their problems and limits, as well as their strengths and resources, can be occasions to improve their educational practices.

THREE: THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS IN RELIGIOUS AND PUBLIC LIFE

The third current research theme links the other two with Auburn's larger mission of extending theological resources as widely as possible to the church and world. Much research on theological education is parochial and fails to make connections between trends and developments in theological education and those affecting American higher education, religion, society and culture more broadly. Too little attention has focused on relationships between theological schools and their environments. Nor have sufficient

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opportunities been available for "outsiders" to the theological world to study its schools and their programs.

Seminary presidents and deans have reported feeling that their institutions are isolated. Frequently, religious leaders, who should be the schools' closest allies, distance themselves by

projecting onto the schools unrealistically high expectations. Meanwhile, most members of local religious communities are only dimly aware that theological schools even exist. University leaders are often hostile to religion and to theology as an intellectual discipline. The general public seems even more remote. The cumulative effect of these various estrangements, according to seminary administrators, is that theological education rarely has a role in the central arenas where public policy and cultural ideals find shape.

The Center plans to examine how various external publics view theological schools and how tensions between the schools, their religious constituencies, and other social institutions have developed. Such studies should stimulate reflection about the potential nature and ideal forms of connections among theological institutions and other schools, religious groups, and social and cultural organizations. This reflection can, in turn, help theological schools to reach out, to forge stronger connections with the religious and social communities that the schools exist to serve.

Lessons from Experience

Some of the earlier research leading to the Center's establishment was Auburn's own. Twenty years ago, the first comprehensive historical study of Protestant seminaries, a project still bearing fruit, originated at Auburn under the direction of its Dean, Robert Wood Lynn.⁴ Later Auburn sponsored research on ministers' continuing

education, Doctor of Ministry degree programs, and theological publishing. In addition, Auburn has conducted evaluations for clients, including foundations and individual seminaries. Auburn's research experience, along with the many other completed studies, provides four important lessons for the design of future work.

ONE: RESEARCH PRECIPITATES CHANGE IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMS, THOUGH OFTEN LESS DIRECTLY THAN PEOPLE EXPECT.

The immediate impact of much research is disappointing. Researchers conscientiously collect data, compile and analyze them; carefully weigh and interpret evidence; and draw conclusions. Yet too often judgments and recommendations produced by this rational process receive only cursory attention from educational leaders; sometimes they are completely ignored.

All schools are complex organizations and communities. This may be even more true of schools where religious faith is regularly professed. The fabric of seminary life is tightly woven of many strands—values, relationships and practices—that are not easily rearranged, even by persuasive evidence that one way of doing things is superior to others. Thus, rational research arguments

have had limited impact on theological education.

Nonetheless, research can have powerful effects. It can help to create conditions in which change may take root and flourish. It can call attention to possibilities as well as problems, subtly raising expectations and altering judgments and values. Even if schools do not adopt the specific conclusions and recommendations of a particular research project, positive change may still be the long-term result.

TWO: DIFFERENT KINDS OF RESEARCH HAVE DIFFERENT EFFECTS.

Some previous researchers in this field relied on surveys and statistical analysis; others employed qualitative, narrative techniques to describe educational and institutional activities. Some of these narrative studies focused on the history of issues or institutions; others explored present conditions. Finally, a series of works that began with the 1983 publication of Edward Farley's *Theologia* offered an unusual kind of study: philosophical and theological inquiry into some of the most basic issues facing theological schools, such as their fundamental purposes and the coherence of their curricula.

Recent projects have varied also in their scope. Some were very specific, taking as their topic a particular—usually pressing—question, such as the

effectiveness of certain fund-raising or financial management techniques. Others explored broader issues—accomplishments and problems of complex educational programs, for instance, and the nature of leadership in theological institutions. A third group, already mentioned, had the broadest focus: on “the questions behind the questions,” fundamental issues of the nature and purposes of theological education.

Each kind of research has strengths and limits. No one kind by itself seems to guarantee lasting improvement or change, but each makes a unique—and significant—kind of difference. Focused research on specific policy or procedural questions that uses empirical methods to show what works and what does not seems to be the most effective in the short term. If a school is already struggling with a particular institutional dilemma or educational question, and if its internal politics and external relationships dispose it to resolve the problem, the school may readily implement recommendations based on carefully analyzed information.

The effects of other types of theological-education studies are less immediate. Educational histories and philosophical discussion of purposes do not make the same kind of concrete difference in schools' day-to-day work. Still, general and speculative studies can have profound consequences. Over time, the ideas and language that such research makes available subtly infiltrate the thought and conversation of individuals and institutions. They affect world views—people's bedrock

convictions about how things really are—and their aspirations—their sense of how things can and should become. As hopes and convictions slowly change, as new images and arguments are shared, as different symbols and values gain power, patterns of activity—including educational activity—change as well.

THREE: THE WAY RESEARCH IS PRESENTED MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN THE WAY IT'S USED.

The fact that research can affect education in both the short and long terms does not mean that it will. Experience shows that research results will resonate more strongly if they are discussed and debated as well as read. Conversation about research may yield responses to it for a deeper reason as well. Education results from communal effort. Its patterns of activity are

sustained by groups, not by individuals alone. Trading research's criticisms and constructive proposals among the members of an educational community can pave the way for decisions to act differently together in the future.

To reach different audiences, research reports must be carefully targeted. Any single report, whether written or oral, is unlikely to make sense to everyone who could benefit from its insights. For some, the presentation will be too technical; for others, too elementary. In most cases, audience diversity requires several different presentations of the same material. Too often, researchers have neglected this reality and directed their work to a narrow audience.

The Center is committed to disseminating information beyond the usual audiences—schools and other theological-education researchers.

Auburn will reach out to all communities that would benefit from a better understanding of theological education: congregations, denominations and other religious bodies, educators, scholars of various sorts. Each of these audiences will require research reports tailored to its needs and language.

FOUR: THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IS COMPLEX AND DIVERSE.

Theological education is often viewed as a small and fairly homogeneous enterprise. There are fewer than 250 graduate-level,



accredited theological schools in North America, and even the largest of these is small by the standards of higher education. These schools do evince many similarities. All, for instance, require the intensive study of sacred texts and religious history and philosophy; and all prepare many of their students for religious professions.

In fact, however, theological education is less a single enterprise than it is a network of allied enterprises that, beneath some common features, have many important differences. Like the large and complex world of American religion that theological schools serve, theological education is variegated—a mosaic of traditions with different histories, values and practices.

Issues and insights that are central for some theological-education communities are of little concern to others. For example, evangelical Protestant theological educators have not shared the sense of crisis that led a group of mostly mainline Protestant writers to raise fundamental questions about the purpose and coherence of theological education. And Protestants in general have shown only limited interest in questions about numbers and quality of students—questions that preoccupy their Roman Catholic counterparts.

Moreover, theological education is not restricted to theological schools. Theological education, understood as both clergy training and the study of

theology, proceeds in a wide array of institutions and settings. These include colleges, conference centers, local congregations, meetings and informal gatherings. Thus, no single set of topics or projects will answer all the most pressing questions about theological education in all religious traditions and institutional settings.

How the Auburn Center Will Do Its Work

Based on these lessons from our own and others' experience, Auburn's research plan prescribes the following guidelines.

THE CENTER'S PROJECTS WILL INCORPORATE A VARIETY OF DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES, METHODS AND TECHNIQUES.

A school that wants to reap all the benefits of research should pay attention to several different kinds. Unfortunately, schools of different traditions and types not only may fall into patterns of favoring one kind of research but may even resist either producing or reading other types.

To counteract this tendency, the Auburn Center will use a variety of methods on every project it undertakes; the goal is to produce a comprehensive picture of the most consequential issues surrounding theological education. The nature of the issues will determine the exact combination of research methods on any one project. Some researchers will be asked to collect and analyze quantifiable data; others to gather and interpret qualitative descriptions gained from interviews and direct observations; still others to study

the history of the topic. In addition some scholars and institutional leaders will be asked to reflect philosophically and theologically on the presuppositions, thought constructs, values and truth of the matters under scrutiny, with a view toward normative prescriptions. To make these diverse research results more usable, the Center will present its reports in ways that reveal how the various quantitative, qualitative, historical and reflective research efforts relate to and amplify each other. Research that really makes a difference, that contributes to wiser policy and more powerful practice, must, we are convinced, explore important issues from many sides.

AUBURN CENTER RESEARCH WILL ADDRESS MULTIPLE AUDIENCES.

Education is a complex social activity that succeeds only if students, teachers, educational staff, and a wide array of outside supporting individuals and institutions work toward the same ends. Though the distinct constituencies may have common goals, they usually have different perspectives, forms of expertise, and ways of making decisions. Auburn will design its projects with the needs and interests of theological education's various stakeholders—students, faculty, administrators, trustees, partners in the church and higher education—in mind.

As noted, this may require several different reports based on the same research, each crafted for its intended

audience. Occasionally the commitment to address different audiences' needs will be built into the research itself; special inquiries may be required to insure that the concerns of one group or another are incorporated.

RESEARCH PROJECTS WILL INCLUDE FORUMS FOR CONVERSATION.

The strong correlation between the positive use of research and the opportunities users have to discuss it led to a strong Center commitment: consistently to provide occasions for person-to-person conversation about critical issues in theological education. Such conversation will take place not only at conferences called in order to share research findings, but also in the process of research design. The Center's panel of advisers will devote sustained effort to discussions about the state of theological education and the kinds

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of research the future will require to strengthen it.

Concerns for audience diversity will also shape conversational forums. In addition to providing opportunities for dialogue, Auburn will design such sessions to help participants in defining and refining their own questions, as well as pinpointing ways to seek answers. Some conferences will bring together representatives of various constituencies to exchange views.

THE CENTER'S PROJECTS WILL RECOGNIZE THE RELIGIOUS AND INSTITUTIONAL PLURALISM OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION. The Center will honor its commitment to multiple audiences in another way as well: by addressing the distinct interests of the several religious traditions. Auburn Seminary stands within a particular tradition—that of liberal Protestantism—but intends for this center to serve a much broader constituency. Thus representatives of other traditions will play important roles in shaping its projects. Roman Catholicism, evangelical Protestantism and Judaism are represented on the Center's panel of advisers. The Center will also enlist researchers from various traditions. Project proposals will avoid assuming that theological education is a homogeneous whole or that what is true in one sector is necessarily true in others.

The Center will also seek to overcome a severe limitation of recent research: its almost exclusive focus on graduate-level theological schools.⁵ Its projects will investigate those other loci where theological

education takes place—congregations, conferences and different kinds of schools that are of central importance for theological education in certain religious communities.

THE AUBURN CENTER WILL WORK COLLABORATIVELY WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS.

Though the Auburn Center is the only institution currently devoted solely to the study of theological education, it wishes to encourage the involvement of other institutions. To this end, Auburn will regularly seek partners in its endeavors. For example, collaborations with Hartford Seminary and the Association of Theological Schools are already underway; other projects in formation will likewise find outside partners.

Taken together, these commitments add up to an unusual approach to research, one that emphasizes multiple



methods, several audiences, and broad rather than narrow definitions of the religious and educational communities to be studied and served. Such a multifaceted approach is necessary to honor the rich diversity of religious communities and their schools.

Indeed, serving those communities has historically been Auburn Seminary's overarching goal. In this regard, the Center is the latest venture for an institution that has always been venturesome. Founded in 1818 in central New York State to prepare ministers for frontier churches, Auburn Seminary also trained workers for foreign missions and was nationally known for its faculty's progressive views and openness to new ideas. After moving in 1939 to Union Theological Seminary's campus in New York City in order to consolidate its dwindling resources, Auburn found a new form for its mission as a Presbyterian center for Union's students. It later added pioneering efforts in the new field of continuing education for ministers, and in recent years founded the research center.

Diverse as they may seem, Auburn's various forms of mission have shared a common purpose: to extend the Gospel as widely as possible. A center that helps theological schools and programs address the challenges and opportunities they face puts into new form Auburn's longstanding mission of reaching out, of extending theological resources to the church and the world beyond it.

Endnotes

1. A bibliography of recent research on theological education is printed elsewhere in this issue of *Auburn Studies*.
2. David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 15.
3. For instance, Hartford Seminary's Center for Social and Religious Research, the Seminary Department of the National Catholic Educational Association, and the Association of Governing Boards have produced important studies.
4. See Heather F. Day, *Protestant Theological Education in America: A Bibliography* (American Theological Library Association and Scarecrow Press, 1985); James W. Fraser, *Schooling the Preachers: The Development of Protestant Theological Education in the United States, 1740-1875* (University Press of America, 1988); and, Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Intellect: The Aims and Purposes of Ante-Bellum Theological Education* (Scholars Press, 1988).
5. A notable exception was an historical work, Virginia Lieson Brereton, *Training for God's Army* (Indiana University Press, 1990), whose subject is the history of Bible training institutes.

Current Research at the Auburn Center

Five major research projects are currently underway at Auburn:

Theme: Practices of Teaching and Learning

Project: Theological Faculty for the Future.

This study of theological faculty in North American schools of Christian theology will include surveys of faculty members and current graduate students as well as special studies of junior faculty, faculty compensation, the doctoral programs that prepare faculty and the recruitment and retention of African American and Hispanic faculty. Supported by grants from Lilly Endowment Inc.

Project: Seminary Cultures.

This ethnographic study of the role that school culture and ethos play in the formation of theological students is being conducted jointly with the research center at Hartford Seminary. Four researchers have spent three years as participant observers in two Protestant seminaries and are currently preparing their findings for publication. Supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Spencer Foundation.

Theme: Institutional Resources

Project: Seminary Student Indebtedness.

The rising debt levels of seminarians are, say seminary and church leaders, among the most serious problems that theological schools and the congregations that plan to hire them will face in the future. This extensive study of

the educational indebtedness of Roman Catholic, Jewish and Protestant seminarians and ministers is the first attempt to document the problem on a national basis and to make recommendations that focus on solutions. The data collection phase of the project is completed; analysis is underway. Supported by grants from Lilly Endowment Inc.

Project: Financing Protestant Theological Education.

This study updates others that have been conducted at ten-year intervals, analyzing changes among amounts and sources of revenues of theological schools. The results will be published in late 1993. Supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.

Theme: Theological Institutions in Religious and Public Life

Project: Training for Urban Ministry.

Why have training programs for many forms of specialized religious work (education, pastoral counseling, foreign missions) become well institutionalized, while training for urban ministry has been only an occasional commitment of religious bodies and theological schools? An historical research project will explore this question. Supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts.



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